



# Idiot Buttons: The Placebo in UX Design

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*by Oliver McGough*



# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>'The Idiot Button' a.k.a. the Placebo Button</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The Illusion of Control</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The Placebo in UX Design</b>	<b>9</b>
The Refresh Button   Putting the user in control	11
The Save Button   Reassuring the user	12
Personalised Content   Building anticipation	14
<b>Takeaways</b>	<b>16</b>

# Introduction

Users love control. Even in an automated world, our user wants control over the 'machine'.

Yet, in an age of ever more intuitive interfaces, control is steadily slipping out of the user's hands. Input is reduced and the user is left only a bystander as an age of automation looms.

The placebo prevents this. The placebo places control back into our users hands. Yet, the placebo does nothing.

## *About the author*



### **Oliver McGough**

Marketer & UXer at **Usabilla**

As a marketer, rather than use the traditional hard-sell, he utilises his UX skills and knowledge to build websites and products people want to use and visit.

Find him on **Twitter** or **LinkedIn**.

## ‘The Idiot button’ a.k.a. the Placebo button

We’ve all been there; walking to a pedestrian crossing just as the red man pops up. The minute spent waiting under the luminous red glow feels like the longest in the world.

So you take to the button alongside you, furiously mashing at it in the hope the green man will banish his misunderstood cousin. Yet no amount of mashing seems to help; you’re still standing there pondering a traffic-weaving run.



Why doesn't that mashing help? Why wouldn't that button deliver what you wanted? Because the button doesn't do anything.

In many cases, **those buttons are nothing but a placebo** – an estimated 90% of New York’s buttons do nothing. A placebo to distract and occupy whilst we wait for the predetermined lights to change. Shocking, I know.

## So why bother with the button at all?

It’s all about control. Without that button, we would come to a crossing unsure whether the lights ‘know’ we are there; unsure if the lights are ever going to change. The button gifts ‘control’ of the lights to the pedestrian. We hit the button while waiting, trusting in the fact that the lights now know we are there and will change for us (despite it being pre-determined!).



“An estimated 90% of New York’s crosswalk signal buttons do nothing.”



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These placebo, or ‘idiot’, buttons aren’t unique to traffic lights, they can be found in many places: **From trains, to office heating systems.**

But why? Why do we need a placebo to gift us control? Are we really all so gullible?

# The Illusion of Control

As it turns out, yes, we really are so gullible.

Of course, the study of the placebo isn't a new one, it's an effect used for both psychological and practical reasons - from drug tests, to traffic lights. Yet when we apply it to the idea of control, the placebo becomes especially interesting for us; gifting users with control of a situation they otherwise wouldn't have.

Though these buttons have no effect on the situation at hand - the traffic, the train, or the heating - there is one place they work to great effect: The user's mind.

To learn more about this we have to step back to the 1970's to Ellen Langer and the "Illusion of Control".

As a graduate student at Yale, Ellen Langer – now a professor at Harvard – was playing a game of poker. While dealing the cards, she decided to ignore convention and deal in her own random order.



## *Ellen Langer*

Psychology Professor at Harvard University

- First woman ever to be tenured in psychology at Harvard.
- Areas of study include the **illusion of control**, decision-making, aging, and mindfulness theory.



Despite everyone receiving the correct number of cards, randomized, and face-down, the other players were up in arms. “The cards somehow belonged to the other person, even though you couldn’t see them.” The randomness remained, but the expected uniformity had been lost and players weren’t happy.



After noting similar habits at slot machines and at dice games, she deduced that “People believed that all of these behaviours were going to increase the probability of their winning,” when in actual fact, they meant nothing.

Subsequently, Langer later wrote a famous paper titled “The Illusion of Control” – a paper which highlighted this bizarre human condition.

By providing an element of control in an otherwise random situation, users were satisfied - their minds at ease. "Feeling you have control over your world is a desirable state," she explains.

"Doing something is better than doing nothing, so people believe, and when you go to press the button your attention is on the activity at hand.

“*Feeling you have control over your world is a desirable state*”

ELLEN LANGER

AUTHOR OF "THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL"

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If I'm just standing at the corner I may not even see the light change, or I might only catch the last part of the change, in which case I could put myself in danger."

If control is a desirable state, then it seems only natural that offering our users control at any given moment will provide a desirable experience. Of course, this isn't always possible – our users are unpredictable at the best of times. It is this intersection of control and automation where the placebo enters web design.

## *The Illusion of Control*

- People are prone to believing their actions will affect entirely random or automated events.
- Ellen Langer proved that having an element of 'control' – no matter how meaningless – **puts the mind at ease** in these situations.
- This "*Illusion of Control*" is therefore **a desirable state** for the person **in situations where they have no control**.

## The Placebo in UX Design

As UX designers, our job is to provide our users with the best possible experience. More often than not, this simply involves providing users with what they want.

There are many cases however where this is not possible. Cases where we can fake interaction by means of a placebo-interaction, giving perceived 'control' to our users.

“*As UX designers, our job is to provide our users with the best possible experience.*”



TWEET THIS

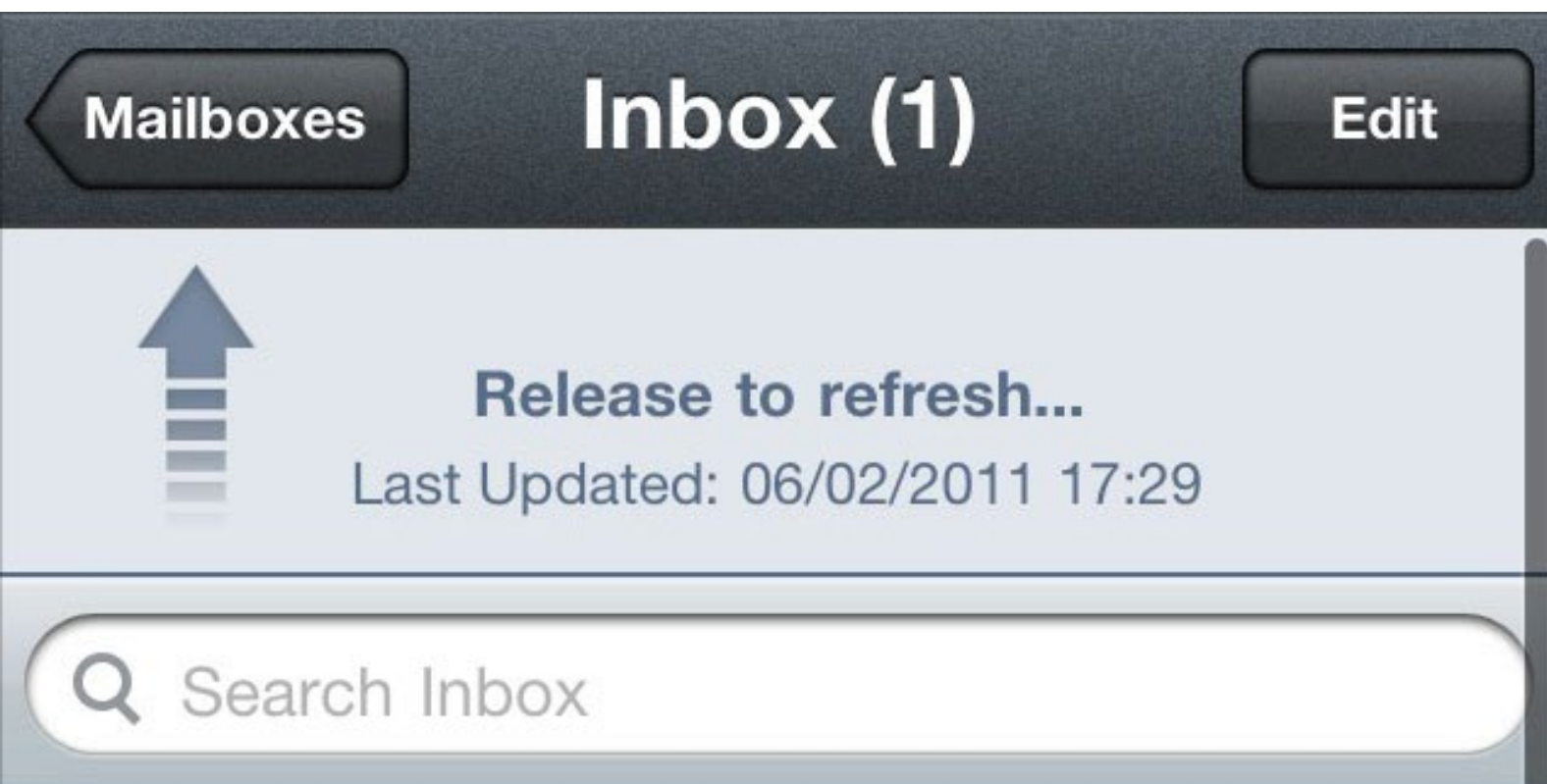
These placebos can come in many shapes and sizes. The illusion of control illustrates the ways we can manipulate a sense of control for the sake of our users' mental state, but control is not the only mental state we are able to manipulate.

The placebo can also be used in cases of reassurance and anticipation, as we'll see from herein.

## The Refresh Button

### Putting the user in control

In world where new information is always ready to be downloaded, the refresh has all but disappeared. Apps will now auto-adjust their contents to match their location (Foursquare), for your social updates (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), or for whatever purpose it is that app is filling.



Yet, despite it not being required, there always remains a method of refreshing the application - be it by swiping downwards, or via a simple button.



## So, why keep a redundant feature?

Again, it is all about control. You might give the user all available information, but how do you convey this to your user? How do they know for sure that all the information has been served?

A placebo-refresh removes any doubt. It tells them that there is no more information to come. It provides relief over waiting, and provides a sense of control to the user's newsfeed where really there isn't any.

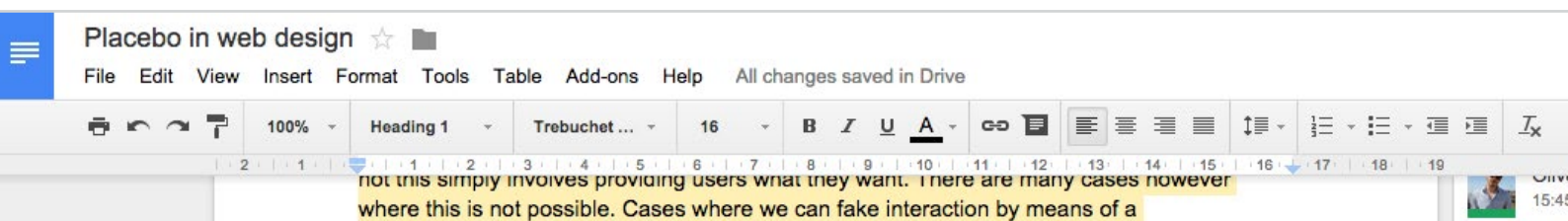
Sometimes (i.e. in case of emails) the refresh does do something – it refreshes the content on demand. This could be considered a soft-placebo; your emails still refresh automatically, but you can also opt to refresh it instantly yourself for the sake of additional control and improved efficiency.

### *Key Takeaways | Putting the User in Control*

- In this instance, the placebo **offers the user a means to manipulate** and control a their experience, **without altering the system**.
- By restraining from a fully automated approach, **we provide relief over waiting**, and can **provide the placebo of improved efficiency**.

## The Save Button | Reassuring the User

Autosaving is nothing new – even as I write this on Google docs I'm alerted on each character input that my changes have been saved to my Drive.



**I remember freaking out using Google Docs  
for the first time as I couldn't save.**

I had to trust this basic system message. In this vein, a placebo button that truly does nothing would be perfect. The user can hit save despite their progress being logged as they type anyway.

Many apps that use autosave already do this – Sketch is one that comes immediately to mind.



My old task flow when closing the application was to save my current project then quit – a process drummed into me through too many unfortunate experiences with essays & MS Word. However, one rushed friday afternoon I simply forced quit the application forgetting to save beforehand. As the the devastation of a wasted days work began to take hold, I shyly reopened the app to reasses the damage.

Lo-and behold, no change. The app had auto-saved, my work was still there, and I realised my many save-then-quit actions had been needless – or was it? That save button had saved me many instances of devastation. Even now, knowing my work is autosaving I still hit the save to allay my fears, confident my work will still be there when I return.

The save button provides the user with a sense of control over the saving process, removing the uncertainty of putting the trust in the machine.

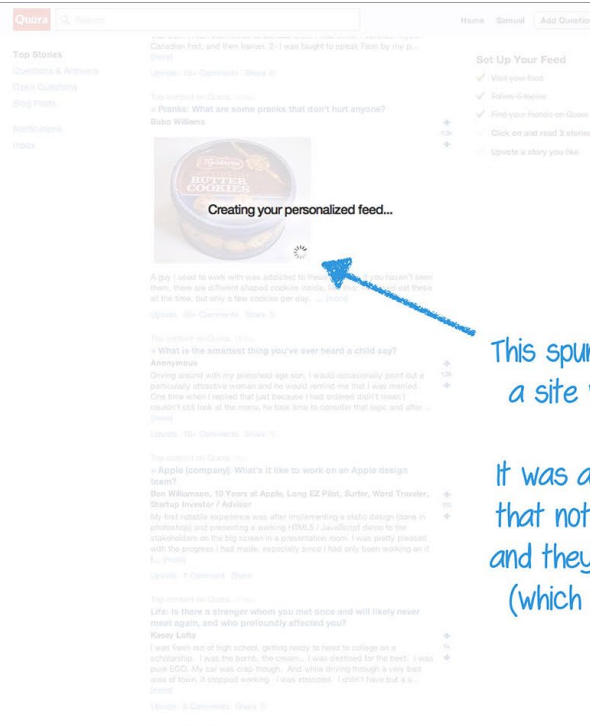
## *Key Takeaways | The Placebo Refresh*

- Ensure the User always **remains in control of the interface**, even if you have to provide **false, or unnecessary interactions**.
- In this instance, **the placebo provides reassurance** to the user and removes uncertainty as well as providing consistency with historic workflows.



# Personalised Content | Building Anticipation

The creation of personalised content is an excellent case study for the use of the placebo. We often find, when signing up for websites that a site will tune itself to meet our needs. It takes what it thinks we like to create a custom, personalized experience. Quora gives us a great example of this:



This spun for much longer than you would think for a site with Quora's level of speed/performance.

It was also for EXACTLY 10 seconds. It's possible that nothing much is happening behind the scenes and they want to make you wait to build suspense (which could result in a higher perceived value).

The user signs up and is asked to select the categories that interest them – anything from 5 up. Once chosen, Quora informs us that it is creating our personalised experience and presents a loading screen.

We are led to believe this short wait involves their software compiling our custom experience. Thousands of algorithms firing to ensure it is just right for me.

## **I wouldn't feel so special if I were you.**

This placebo-ed wait is nothing more than filler. Something to make you feel special, make it seem as if all this processing power is being devoted to you. The algorithm probably takes no more than a few microseconds to create your dashboard, but the wait makes it seem so much valuable.

The placebo in this context is less about control, and more about building anticipation.

### *Key Takeaways | Building Anticipation*

- By restricting our users' access to content, we can **build a sense of anticipation.**
- In this instance, the placebo can be **used to artificially increase the value of the experience.**

## Takeaways

As we've seen, there are many types of placebo we can use to our advantage. In my mind, the three mentioned above are the strongest use-cases for the placebo in UX; though there are undoubtedly many more instances where we can use false or unnecessary interactions to create a desirable state of mind for our users.

Much of the time, it could be argued that these 'unnecessary' interactions fall into the realm of Dark UX – a subject that divides opinion in itself – due to the additional 'mess' added to our users' workflows.

As UX designers our job is to provide the best possible experience. Sometimes to achieve this, it is necessary to manipulate our users on a psychological level – this is what the placebo helps us to achieve.

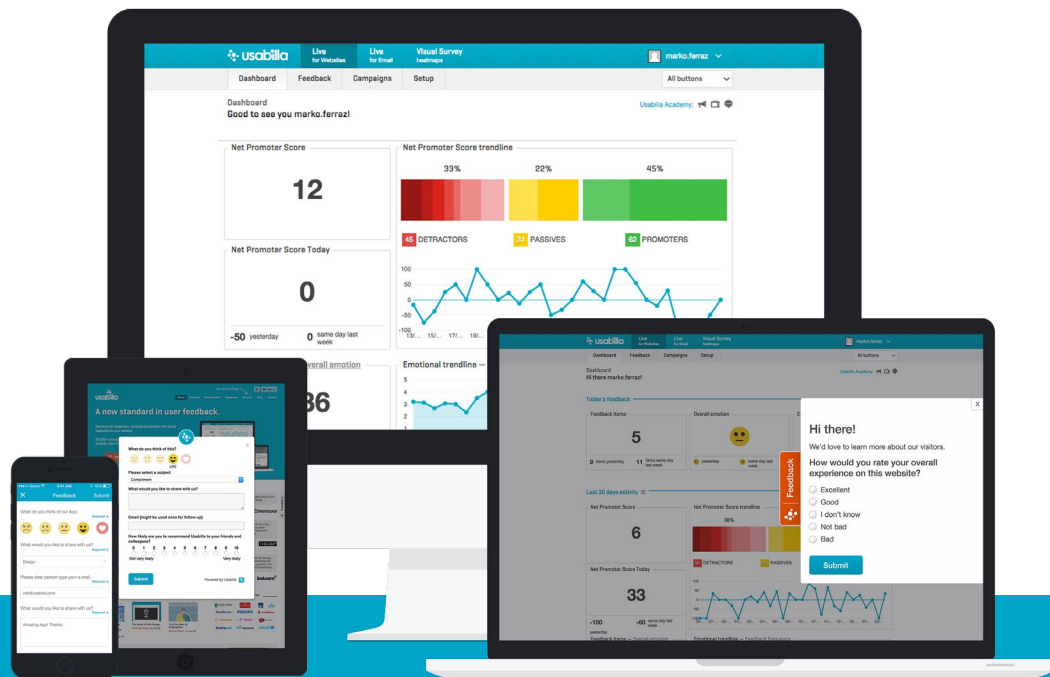
### *Key Learning Outcomes*

- You must **ensure the user remains in a beneficial state of mind**, even if you have to provide fake interactions.
- By using the placebo in UX design, we can **manipulate our users' experience without altering the system**.
- There are many types of placebo we can use to our advantage including **Control, Manipulation, and Reassurance**.

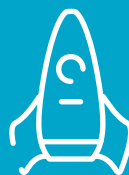


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